

When the Faithful Face Confusion
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
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Introduction

Years ago, I had a friend named Cindy. Cindy was the kind of person that every church likes to have around. She was a friendly, cheerful person who enjoyed participating in every aspect of church life. She attended church - More than once a week. She volunteered for all kinds of things. She believed heavily in personal spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study, often opening her home to friends who wanted to have Bible studies in a home setting.

Now, Cindy had a job. It wasn't her favorite job, but she showed up on time every day and worked hard. Because she worked hard, one day, she accomplished a dream. She had spent most of her adult life driving beat-up, old cars. But the day arrived that she had saved enough for a new vehicle. I remember her excited look when she told everyone that she purchased a new Honda Civic. You can imagine how proud she was of her shiny new car.



One day, my friend Cindy was invited to a prayer meeting at church. The prayer meeting was to take place early on a Friday morning. In order to attend, everyone had to wake up very early. That way, they would have time to pray, and then make it to work.

Everybody knew that this was a hardship. Waking up early means not getting as much sleep as you'd like. It meant feeling tired. Maybe it meant having a quick, small breakfast instead of something more substantial. These were all very dedicated people.

So, Cindy set the alarm to allow her plenty of time. When she woke up, it was still dark outside. She had to go through her daily preparations very quietly, so she wouldn't wake up her roommate. When she was ready, she walked out of her apartment, got into her car, started the car, and put the car into gear.

Unfortunately, when she backed out of her parking spot, she heard a sound that no one wants to hear - Much less someone with a brand-new car. She heard her car hitting something. I've heard that sound. It's very, shall we say, unsettling. She stepped out and found that in the dark, she hadn't seen the telephone pole behind her car. Only a moment before, for the first time in

her life, Cindy had an unblemished, shiny new car. After only owning it for a short time, she now had a car with an embarrassing big dent.

I ran into her at a church meeting soon after this. Someone asked her how her new car was. She sadly told the story. I still remember the way she finished the story. She said, "I'm doing everything I'm supposed to - Why did God let this happen to me?" She then added, "I mean, I was going to a **prayer meeting**."

Cindy was very confused. She was doing lots of things right. But, God allowed something painful into her life.

We're going to hit a tough topic today. There are many people like Cindy: People who are doing a lot of the right things, but who experience something painful. When that happens it's very confusing.

We're in our series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe". In this study, we're working through the Gospel According to Matthew. Today, our message is: "When the Faithful are Confused".

We're going to read about a man. A good man; a righteous man; a **faithful** man. We're going to learn that, even though he was a faithful man, God allowed something very painful and confusing to enter his life.

Do you ever find yourself confused? Well, listen as we read in Matthew Chapter 1.

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:18-19)

We're told in the opening verse of our passage that we're about to learn how Jesus the Messiah was born. We'll talk more about that in a bit. We're told that the mother of Jesus, Mary, was pledged to be married to Joseph.

Engagement and Marriage in ancient Jewish Culture

In any culture, getting married is a major event. It's one of the big highlights of any person's life. People often look forward to it for their whole lives. Childhood stories are filled with images of a hero or a prince meeting a beautiful woman. And then they fall in love and live happily ever after. Many a young person imagines that someday they will be a happily married.

This is especially true in Middle Eastern cultures. Marriages are usually arranged. Parents find matches for their children. When things are working right, parents work hard to find just the right young lady for their sons. The process can take a long time.

You can imagine how happy Joseph and his family would be on the day that they found this very special woman. You can imagine how much Joseph, and his family, and all his friends, would look forward to this big event.

But then, one day, Joseph hears something unimaginable. *His bride-to-be is pregnant.* Joseph knows that he's not the father. This, to him, and to most people, could only have one explanation. In modern language, we would say that Mary cheated on Joseph. She was unfaithful. To add insult to injury, Jewish culture was very strict about relationships between men and women. This was not common in Joseph's world.

Joseph's reaction

Now, stop and think what must have gone through Joseph's mind. This is supposed to be the biggest event of his life. His family and he had worked hard to find the right person. This young woman, Mary, gave every appearance of being a righteous woman.

Most importantly, we're told in the text that we just read that Joseph was a man who was faithful to the law. Some translations say he was "just" or "righteous". My sources suggest that the NIV translation (that we read) captures the spirit of the text the best. Joseph knew well the Law of the Jewish people, and he had been faithful.

I could imagine Joseph going someplace private, and praying something like this: "Lord, how could you let this happen to me? I have studied your Law. I have done my best to follow it. This doesn't happen! Why me? Why did this happen to me?"

Joseph was in a bad spot. But, there is something that makes matters even worse.

Engagement vs. Marriage

In our modern times, when people want to be married, they start by becoming engaged. Engagement means that two people *intend* to be married. Normally, couples get engaged, they make their plans, and then they have a wedding. In our modern era, engagements are important, but weddings are the big, *official* event. By "official", I mean legal. Prior to being married, if something goes wrong, either partner can leave the engagement. We call this "breaking the engagement". It's sad, but there is nothing legal required to do it.

Once you're married though, you have a legally binding arrangement. In order to be married, you must have legally registered documents. You must have a legally recognized official to

manage the ceremony. If you want to leave a marriage, you must take legal action: You must officially divorce your partner.

In the Jewish world where Joseph lived, the legal arrangements were different.

Engagement was official. Engagement, or betrothal, was the legal point where a marriage began. So, if something went wrong during the engagement period, you had to officially divorce your partner.

The Teaching of the Law on Infidelity

So, here's Joseph. He thinks that he has been betrayed. He's very confused, because he has been faithful to the law.

The story gets more complex when you consider the teachings of the law for adultery. To quickly summarize: If two people are found to be in an inappropriate physical relationship and one of them is married to someone else, or in this case engaged, this is adultery. Here is the penalty for adultery:

If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. (Leviticus 20:10)

In our world today, people are sad when we hear about adultery. However, most people don't see it as severe. To God though, the gift of marriage is a sacred gift. Adultery is serious – very serious.

A serious problem

So, Joseph is faithful to the law. The law says that adulterers should die.

Now, recall that the Roman Empire had invaded ancient Israel. Here's a funny thing about the Romans: The Romans didn't like the idea of local death penalties. If the leaders of a subject nation felt that someone should receive a death penalty, they had to approach the Romans for permission. And the Romans didn't think adultery was a big enough problem to warrant a death penalty. This was *probably because they were like modern society today*.

This created a dilemma for the Jewish religious teachers, because the Law took adultery very seriously. *Certain kinds of evil were to be eliminated from the land*. Because of this, the next step for adultery was divorce. Maybe the Jewish people couldn't have a death penalty, but because adultery was so serious, perhaps they could do to a person emotionally what they were prevented from doing physically. So, some teachers of the day taught that divorce should be very public. It should be very loud and very painful. *People who committed adultery were to be made an example*.

So, once again, here's Joseph. He thinks that he has been betrayed. He's very confused, because he has been faithful to the law. He's angry, he's hurting. It would have been tempting no doubt to think, "I've been really hurt. The Law permits, maybe even commands that I take serious action against the woman who did this."

Nevertheless, there's something very interesting and unusual about this man.

In our last session, we mentioned that Matthew is setting up themes in the opening statements of his book. Themes that will become important later as we read. Here's one of those themes:

The letter of the law vs. the heart of the law.

As we just quoted, Moses made a statement saying that adultery was worthy of a death penalty. But here's something that was later said by the prophet Hosea:

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice... (Hosea 6:6)

Joseph believes that Mary has committed adultery. The Law says that she should be divorced. But, the heart of the Law includes love and mercy. So, we're told that Joseph considers divorcing Mary, but he's going to do it privately, quietly, so he won't destroy her.

Jesus will later quote the verse from Hosea that we're looking at. But Joseph had a sense of it much earlier. This gives us an insight into what a special man he was. *A man fit to do something very special.*

So, how does God respond to this man Joseph?

-A faithful man who believes a tragedy has entered his life.

-A man who is confused by the events surrounding him.

Let's read more in Matthew 1.

God let's Joseph in on his plan and shares important principles for us.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:20-21)"

How does God react to the pain and confusion of Joseph? In this case, God reacts in a powerful supernatural way.

Before we get too far, let me mention that powerful supernatural interventions are not common. It would be fair to say, “This is all well and good, but how does this apply to me?” Hang in. Although this situation is unusual, I believe there is a principle here for all of us.

Let me explain: God sends an angel to Joseph. The angel speaks to Joseph in a dream. The angel gives some important details about the birth of Jesus, but here’s the over-arching principle: The angel really is saying two things:

- This is not what it seems.
- There is something much bigger going on.

God is saying to Joseph, “I have not missed your faithfulness. Far from making you a victim, I am about to give you an awesome privilege. I will use you for something great. Mary is not a sinful woman – she is a righteous woman. Because Mary is righteous, I am rewarding her. Because you are a faithful man, I am about to reward you. I will allow you both to have the awesome privilege of participating in my world-changing plan.”

God is telling Joseph that, because of his faithfulness, he is being allowed to watch the unfolding of an unimaginable display of God’s power. The child in Mary’s womb did not come about by any human action. It was caused in a way that had never happened before, and never happened since. What was conceived there was “From the Holy Spirit”.

The angel says to Joseph, “You Joseph will take Mary home as your wife.” Then, the angel tells Joseph who this child will be. He tells Joseph to give the child the name “Jesus”. The Hebrew name, “Jeshua”, that we pronounce today as “Jesus”, is a word that means, “God is Salvation”. *This child, Joseph is told, will save his people from their sins.*

So, Joseph is told that the situation is not what it seems. There is something much bigger going on.

Now, if it wasn’t amazing enough that God performed such a miracle, he then goes on to let us know that this was all announced as part of his plan.

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23
“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”
(which means “God with us”). (Matthew 1:22-23)

Yet another prophecy fulfilled

Matthew uses this phrase: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said”. He uses it a number of times in Matthew. His closest friends, the Jewish people, knew about these prophecies. I said this before, and I’ll say it many times as we work our way through Matthew: ***Matthew wanted his friends to know that God is powerful, and God is faithful.***

God shows us his power and faithfulness through fulfilled prophecy. Yet one more time, Matthew points out that God did not merely perform great miracles through Jesus, he **predicted** his actions centuries before. The prophecy that Matthew quotes here was given by Isaiah. Isaiah lived around 700 years before the time of Christ. So, God can say that something will happen 7 centuries in advance, and he can control all the events from the time he says it, to the time it takes place. That requires great power, and great faithfulness.

Let's read the rest of the story. It ends with a surprising twist.

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.
(Matthew 1:24-25)

So, Joseph, being a faithful man, obeyed and did what the Angel told him. He took Mary home as his wife. Now, here's the important twist: *We're told that he did not consummate the marriage until she gave birth to a son.* Because of this, neither Joseph nor Mary had any doubt where the child came from. Because of this action, we too have no doubt.

This must have been very hard for Joseph. Again, God chose a special man to take care of young Jesus and his mother Mary.

I'm going to share some important points in a minute but let me linger here. There are times when we must share the fact that we disagree with some faith groups. The Catholic Church believes that Mary was a perpetual virgin - She never had relations with a man. We powerfully disagree with this. It says here that Joseph did not consummate the marriage **until** Mary gave birth to a son. The language here indicates that he eventually did consummate the marriage. Later, the Gospels include stories about the brothers of Jesus. This would make perfect sense if Joseph and Mary had more children together.

Our Catholic friends would say that these were children of Joseph from a previous marriage. There is nothing in the text of the Bible to indicate this. We in evangelical circles would suggest with all due respect that the Catholic church has a distorted view of both Mary and marriage. This makes them grasp for straws when they run into clear indications that their doctrine doesn't match the scriptures.

Those are topics for another day. For now, let's see how this is important to us.

Why this is important to us

Why is this important for us? Because lots of people are confused.

Let's learn about how we can handle confusion like this.

In order to handle confusion, let's look at the two things that the angel said to Joseph.

- **This is not what it seems.**
- **There is something much bigger going on.**

I would like to suggest to everyone that this happens to all of us more than we know. One of the biggest things you need to handle this principle is ***time***. We need to give God time to show his power and faithfulness.

Three Situations where the principles apply

Let's look at three kinds of situations where this happens.

Situation 1: This is not what it seems.

Example: The Virgin Birth

The Virgin Birth is a symbol of the power of God. It's a core belief for any Christian.

For years, unbelievers mocked Christians. They said things like this: "You stupid Christians - Stupid, Stupid, Stupid. Your faith contains fairy tales like the virgin birth. Don't you know that such a thing isn't possible? Don't you believe in basic science? You stupid Christians need to start listening to science and give up on nonsense like the virgin birth!"

Because of hits, it may have seemed to some that science disproved faith in the bible.



Then, something happened in 1978. The first "test tube baby" was born. Scientists found that, using a special technique called "in vitro fertilization", people could have a child born a very unusual way. *They could bypass the normal process.* Now, this technique does involve a father, but it was the start to a whole world of possibilities. *It turns out that human children can be born in unusual ways.*

Today, science goes much further: we talk about genetic manipulation. Not only will children be born in unusual ways, we're told, but we'll be able to control qualities like intelligence, strength, and a whole host of other things.

Now, for us, God can do things much bigger than our best scientists. But for now, let's understand that for years, Christians were told that the children being born in an unusual way, a way that bypassed the normal process, was unscientific, and that we were stupid to believe in such things. All this changed with a change in Science.

Now, did the world say, "Hey everyone, guess what? We were wrong! As it turns out, the Christians aren't stupid for believing in things like a virgin birth. Hey, you Christians, we're really sorry!"

No, that didn't happen.

For all our young people in school: Sometimes, you will be told that science disproves the Bible. Guess what? Science has a funny way of changing its mind. Science does that a lot. In fact, many times, Science turns out to prove that the Bible is true.

I call this the "spiritual vacuum period". A "spiritual vacuum period" is the time that occurs between two events.

- Event 1: someone shows you "compelling evidence" that the Bible is not true.
- Event 2: You find out that the "compelling evidence" has been discredited.

So, remember: Things are not always as they seem. There is something much bigger going on. Give God time to show his power and faithfulness.

Situation #2: It seems like you're the victim of a random universe.

In the case of Joseph, it looked like Mary had been unfaithful. This turned out to be wrong. But sometimes, real problems come into our lives. Sometimes our spouse really is unfaithful. Sometimes people close to us get sick; really sick. Sometimes evil people steal from us. The list goes on.

The problem is that when we face these things, the world tells us that we are victims of a random universe. Or worse, we are victims of an incompetent God. The world tells us to become angry. The world tells us to despair.

Here's what God tells us:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4 (ESV))

Remember, God said to Joseph, "I have not forgotten your faithfulness - It's because of your faithfulness that I'm giving you a special job."

Can I ask you to consider something? Maybe God has brought a person into your life who really needs you. That person needs a special person to care for them. They need a faithful person to love them with the love of Christ. Sometimes they need this for a long time. Maybe God chose you, because you have that special ability? It can be hard sometimes to care for a hurting person. Lonely, too. But remember, when you are obedient to God, he walks with you.

This is not what it seems. You are not a victim of a random universe or an incompetent God. There is something much bigger going on. Give God time to show his power and faithfulness.

Situation 3: It seems like God doesn't care.

This may be an extension of the previous situation, but we'll give it its own place. Recall, the angel said something very important about Jesus.

...he will save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:21)

Jesus confused a lot of people in his day. Many people in the time of Jesus thought that the Messiah would be a political leader who would free them from the Romans. When Jesus didn't immediately kick out the Romans, those people were confused. There will come a day when Jesus will come to the earth to wipe out all injustice. But that day is in the future. In this advent, his first advent, Jesus came to save people from their sins.

Let's say you visit a doctor. The doctor discovers something - a cancerous growth. If this happens, the doctor will do something; They'll send you to a surgeon who will cut out the cancer. Understand this: *Cutting out cancer is painful.*

Sometimes, God allows painful things to come into our lives, not because he doesn't care about us, but because he does. He loves us. He cherishes us. Because he cherishes us, he doesn't want to leave the cancer of sin in our lives.

It's sad, but we may need the painful experience to make us face our sin. Sometimes, the sin is close to the surface, and it only take one cut to remove it. Sometimes though, the sin is buried under years of foolish choices and idolatry. In this case, Jesus, the expert surgeon, may have to do a lot of cutting. It may take a lot of pain before we are free.

I have heard more than one story of a person who is brought low by things going wrong in their lives. Maybe they've broken the law, and they're in prison. There, they here the message of Jesus. They realize that they've done wrong and, they repent.

Maybe you're not at the point where you're in physical prison, but you have things in your life that you need to face. Do you have something in your life that you know is wrong? Let Jesus help you to face it. Let him help you to turn away. It may be painful to do so, but in the end, you will see the reward.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

So, Mathew tells us the story of how Jesus was born. This is a vital story that puts God's incredible power on display. In this story, a good man, a faithful man is allowed to go through a very confusing event. He discovers though, that his event is not what he thought. He discovered that things were not what they seemed. Far from missing Joseph's faithfulness, God was about to use it. Joseph was invited to participate in the world-changing plan of God. He was to be the earthly father of the child who would later be known as Jesus, the Messiah.

He learned that things are not always what they seem.

- They're often part of a bigger plan.

Are you sometimes confused? Look at your situation, and consider these three simple statements:

- This is not what it seems.
- There is something much bigger going on.
- Give God time to show his power and faithfulness.

Give God time. You'll be glad you did.